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ABSTRACT

Increasing interest of college students in scriptwriting suggests a need for more professional writing programs. Such programs should be directed by faculty members with experience in both writing and teaching. Writing format and techniques are two major emphases. Students can learn the proper format from accessible scripts, techniques from structured training in creating ideas, outlining treatments, scripting and revising the draft. References in the theory, practice, and techniques of writing are included. (SC)

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DEVELOPING THE TELEVISION AND FILM WRITER

by

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In the past few years, the study of film and television has grown incredibly on campus with an enormous number of students enrolled in a variety of courses -- including scriptwriting, the "avante garde" of writing programs. The fact that so many potential writers are first exposed to the discipline on campus suggests a heavy responsibility for the university, and opens it up to some critical inquiry.

For example, who is teaching writing? Is it an active TV or film writer; an instructor with some genuine creative flair and expertise? Or is it someone who never saw a script before in his life, and doesn't really care to; is he someone assigned to teach an otherwise uncovered course? From coast to coast, campus to campus, the entire spectrum of possibilities is represented. The fact is, there is no standardization of faculty, and there is a shortage of people with real qualifications. Some schools, e.g., U.S.C., U.C.L.A., N.Y.U., Loyola, Wisconsin, and Texas (yes, I said "Texas"), have legitimate scriptwriting programs that help prepare a student to face the real world and to enter the mainstream of the profession. But other schools simply fall short of the professionalism expected by the industry.

Professionals are concerned about the problem on campus, if for no other reason than self-preservation (the market is inundated by unusable scripts). Certain writers are particularly interested in activating writing programs

on campus, and have had unusual success. These Writer-Professor hyphenates (who will, no doubt split into a Professor's Caucus), include Bill Froug, Harlan Ellison, Jerry McNeely, Ed Anhalt, Irwin Blacker, Milt Gelman, and many others who know whereof they teach. Other writers are involved in workshops, guest lecturing, serving as artists-in-residence, etc., promoting the professional-academic contact. That same interest and concern is reflected by the W.G.A.W.'s Academic Liaision Committee, which endorsed a proposal by the National Association of Educational Broadcasters (N.A.E.B.) to find parity of esteem between creative and scholarly works published by faculty members. In essence this suggests a new look at the "publish-or-perish" syndrome on campus, involving the creative activities of a Writer-Professor. The W.G.A.W. Board of Directors officially supported that proposal.

The interest of professionals is vital for developing a meaningful writing program on campus. This does not mean that all writers will necessarily make good teachers, or that all teachers must have an armload of credits. It simply means that professional experience is an unqualified asset, especially when combined with essential attributes of good teaching. What are those attributes? The same as those for a story consultant-producer-psychologist-guru. The writing instructor must know howto inspire creativity, to nurture it, to discipline it, to supervise its development, and to ultimately evaluate it. In this context his screen credits are less important than his skill as a communicator, and his ability to initiate and sustain a relevant course of study.

Let's transcend the real world for a moment, and draw an idyllic picture of the writing teacher and the optimum writing program. LOCALE: A sprawling university, dedicated to the principles of professionalism, located in the heart of Beverly Hills, a heartbeat away from Hollywood. THE STUDENT: A bright, talented person, original in thought, prolific in ideas, and calloused in typing fingers. He or she has gobs of financial support, and boasts family contacts throughout the highest echelons of the Black Tower. THE INSTRUCTOR: A seasoned professional, genuinely interested in developing fresh and new talent. He conducts story conferences much like the ones he holds daily at Paramount. Under this optimum tutorial environment, it's only a short step from the student's typewriter to the William Morris Agency; from anonymity to renown; from eeking out a living to eating out at Chasen's; from entering the T.B.S. lot in a VW to riding out in a custom-made Mercedes.

Unfortunately, the optimum environment is as much a fiction as The Six Million Dollar Man. Even with established professionals guiding them, relatively few student projects are immediately sold. But the projects are in proper format and style, and the students are that much closer to consummating their first deal. This brings us to another major problem on the university campus -- many student scripts are simply not appropriate, in content or in form, for the professional marketplace. Assuming for a moment that writing can be taught (and I belive it can -- in the same sense that acting, painting, and music can be "taught"), I'd like to suggest some guidelines for correcting that problem.

As any writer, agent, or producer can attest, the marketplace is saturated with stories and scripts by working professionals and "almost"-professionals. If the student is going to battle the windmills of Universal, Columbia, and M.G.M., he or she had better have a script that can compete credibly in the wars. All worthy projects won't be produced (in fact, the majority won't), but if a script is well-written -- in concept, form, and style -- it has a better chance of being read. If a script looks like a mutilated hybrid of stage play/novella/video/film, it won't get past the secretary. Lack of proper form is a major problem on many campuses. Why? One reason is that scripts are not available for students (and some instructors) to gain familiarity with formats. Current scripts can be found littering the studio file cabinets, abandoned on studio stages, or burned as offerings to Lew Wasserman. But they're hardly ever found on campus. A typical writing class may thumb through the weary pages of a ten year old Hee Haw script to discover what a "real" screenplay looks like. It's a predicament -- especially for colleges outside the boundaries of the major production centers. I'd like to suggest, for the sake of the student writer as well as the studio reader, that we explore avenues to make scripts available to college campuses. The fight against screenwriting illiteracy may also represent a substantial and untapped area for additional revenue from distribution of scripts -- if the copyright problem can be resolved between writer and studio, and if a publisher or studio invests in the national collegiate market for distribution. The need is well established, and the marketplace is wide open.

Let me go back to the guidelines for a writing program, and assume that the proper format is a fait accompli. Now "technique" becomes the predominant concern. It's an all-inclusive, all-powerful, all-ambiguous word, encompassing every step of writing -- from the germination of the idea to story plotting; from visualization to characterization; from the development of the first draft to the revision of the final draft. It would help to clarify the illusion that scriptwriting involves one technique, when in fact it breaks down into four: (1) creating and conceptualizing the idea; (2) writing the treatment; (3) scripting the first draft; (4) revising the screenplay.

If the student writer analyzes the early stages of scriptwriting, he must begin with the idea, itself. Ideas are derived from an infinite number of sources, ranging from our own sensitivity and ingenuity to circumstance, happenstance, and anything else within the province of the universe (and sometimes beyond). The technique of conceptualizing that idea involves several key questions: Is it unique? Is it capable of intriguing fifty million viewers or movie-goers? Is it visually exciting? Is it capable of sustaining one hundred twenty pages? And most important, is it marketable to a producer, network, or studio?

The last question should be the pivotal one for evaluation in any successful writing program. The scriptwriter must know the realities of the profession and work creatively within that framework. Some academicians may be concerned that marketability means "selling out". Not at all. It means considering the quality, artistry, and style of the piece as much as it means considering the castability, relevancy, and packaging potential of the project. If an idea is

unique, and it is developed creatively and visually, the project's value is increased considerably, and the writer's potential shines.

The next stage--writing the treatment--affords an opportunity to develop another critical technique. It involves the careful plotting of the story through selective use of sequences; developing the hook and twists throughout all the action in the story; depicting credible and dimensional characters in a concise style; defining the mood and pacing of the potential film, itself.

It's not until the first draft that the actual technique of scriptwriting can be taught. Here is a new process, borne of the conceptualized idea and the outlined treatment. The script brings to life the ideas, the places, the characters, the action -- all of which seem consistent, visually exciting, and totally identifiable. The technique of the first draft needs to deal with such fundamental scripting problems as exposition (is it forced? Is it revealed awkwardly in huge hunks of dialogue?); plotting (is the storyline lost in some overwritten areas? Is the build as effective as possible?); characterization (is the character acting and reacting like a real human being? Is eachcharacter different from the other?).

Just a word more on the problems of characterization in the first draft. The beginning writer often has difficulty dealing with the inner sense of dialogue that sparks credibility and identifiability. There might be a tendency to write choppy, staccato, unnatural dialogue, or to over-theatricalize some dialogue, making the character sound literary and pretentious. The opposite happens, too. A script may be peopled with characters misplaced from a 1950's

version of A Streetcar Named Desire ("Well...uh...I...um...well...y'know what I mean, huh..? Hmmm?") It might be helpful for the student writer to consider himself the ultimate actor, playing twenty different roles, each fully realized and spontaneous. The writer must conjure up the moment-to-moment realities of each character, each action, each interaction through his own power of intuition.

Another question must be considered at this stage in developing technique. Is the description vivid? Is the visual imagery working? It may sound a bit elementary, but often the beginning writer creates a play without action ("Oh, I thought you'd know I wanted the character to light a match and burn his foot when he says those lines."). The action must not be taken for granted; it's an integral part of the visualization. The action must be described, the locales intricately painted, the shots forcefully implied (but not explicitly directed). The potential for the script is in the hands of the writer, who must think and act like the first creative artist.

Now we move to the final technique -- the rewrite stage -- which is the most arduous and puzzle-like challenge for any writer. It involves the ability to juxtapose scenes and characters to build a tightly compressed final project. It incorporates the sharpening of dialogue, the trimming of scenes, the bolstering of action, the careful orchestration of pacing and mood. The rewrite process is a learning experience which is essential to the development of any writer. If the rewrite has been successful, the revised draft will be [illegible] useful in proving the student's potential. It should be evaluated according to the same criterion established by the industry: "Is it saleable?" The student must compare his or her concept, plot, action, form, and style against the current expectations and standards of the industry.

Obviously, there are many other areas that need to be explored in writing classes on campus, from developing original TV series presentations (with formats, character descriptions, pilot story, and future storylines) to packaging and marketing original feature screenplays. If writing students are to seriously benefit from their initial training in college, they have to be equipped to deal with the realities of their chosen profession. One of those realities was suggested by William Inge when he referred to Broadway as a place you can make a killing -- but not a living. He might have said the same about Hollywood. The writer who wishes to enter the mainstream of the profession must have the talent, the technique, and the insuperable perserverance (not necessarily in that order) to succeed. The colleges and universities have a responsibility to oversee that development, and to help potential writers graduate with more than just a degree under their arms. Hopefully, a student will be carrying some original properties into the arena, and with fortitude and contacts, one may even sell for $300,000. If the student holds out for a percentage of the profits, we know he's been trained well.

A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR

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Dr. Richard A. Blum

Format and Technique of TV & Film Writing.

Books offering a solid approach to script formats are a scarce commodity, with professional screenplays serving as the most reliable modeling source. One very worthwhile attempt to codify writing formats is:

Coopersmith, Jerry. Professional Writer's Teleplay/Screenplay Format: A brief (24pp.) but thorough guide to the accepted script format of the TV and motion picture industries. Published by the Writers Guild of America, East (1970), 22 West 48th St., New York, N.Y. Cost: $2.00.

Other books dealing with writing technique are not particularly outstanding, although they are often used for lack of more informative material available:

Barnouw, Eric. The Television Writer. New York: Hill & Wang, 1962. Good book.

Herman Lewis. A Practical Manual of Screen Playwriting. Cleveland: World Publishing, 1963. A popular and useful paperback on film writing.

Trapnel, Cole. Teleplay. San Francisco: Chandler Publishing, 1967.

Vale, Eugene. Technique of Screenplay Writing. New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1972.

Willis, Edgar E. Writing TV and Radio Programs. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967.

Theory and Practice of TV and Film Writing.

One of the classic books in the field of dramatic theory, construction, and development remains most relevant for writers in the filmic media. It's one of the few essential books:

Egris, Lajos. The Art of Dramatic Writing. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966.

Works dealing specifically with the theory and practice of TV and film writing include:

Ellison, Harlan. "Writing for Television Today." Writer's Digest, July, 1976, pp. 15-21. Ellison's article is especially relevant and practical; a clever discourse on the problems of writing for network television.

Froug, William, ed. The Screenwriter Looks at the Screenwriter. New York: Dell Publishing, 1972. An unusually informative compilation of interviews with outspoken screen writers, who discuss their theories and thoughts on writing as a profession.

Two works outline the controversial issue of censorship as a practical problem faced by the writer in the television medium:

Blum, Richard A. "Freedom and Censorship in Dramatic Television Writing". Resources in Education, November, 1976. From a paper presented at the Freedom to Create convention, Tallahassee, Florida, January, 1976.

Rintels, David W. Statement Before the Senate Subcommittee on Constitutional Rights, February 8, 1972. This is an exceptionally powerful statement, offering a detailed and incisive look at the issue of censorship in TV writing, rich with anecdotes and statistics. The author is now President of the Writers Guild of America, West.

Television Program Development: The Creation of New TV Series.

There is no book available that offers information to the writer on technique and format of series presentations. Two works, however, are invaluable to the writer contemplating the creation of an original series:

Miller, Merle and Evan Rhodes. Only You, Dick Daring. New York: William Sloan and Associates, 1964. This remains a classic demonstration of how a pilot is developed by the writer, aborted by the studio, and mangled by the network.

Whitfield, Steve and Gene Roddenberry. The Making of Star Trek. New York: Ballantine Books, 1972. This paperback provides an excellent account of how the series was put together, from conception and development to sale and production.

Agents and Marketing.

A complete list of literary agents approved by the Writers Guild of America is offered at no charge by the Writers Guild:

"Agencies That Have Subscribed to the Writers Guild of America - Artists Manager Basic Agreement". The list of agents includes information pertaining to which agents will consider material from novice writers. Contact the Writers Guild of America, West, 8955 Beverly Blvd., Los Angeles, Calif. 90048.

The Writers Guild also compiles a current Television Market List for each television season, listing all shows in prime-time, contacts for each series, synopses of individual shows, who is in charge of writer submissions, and whether story submissions are opened or closed. Available to non-members for $1.00, from Writers Guild of America, West, 8955 Beverly Blvd., Los Angeles, Calif. 90048.

The Scriptwriter is a new (1977) monthly trade journal for the professional TV and film writer, dealing with all aspects of the art of film writing, including current marketing trends. A one-year subscription is $30.00, from The Scriptwriter, P.O. Box 1941, Hollywood, Calif.90028.

WGAW Newsletter is a monthly publication of the Writers Guild, primarily for its membership, but non-members may purchase issues at $1.50 per issue. It discusses the most relevant issues in open forum format. Available from Writers Guild of America, West, 8955 Beverly Blvd. 90048.

Grants and Awards Available to American Writers is a vital funding resource for writers in all fields. It is published annually by P.E.N.

Writers Market is an annual compilation of marketing trends in all fields of writing, with more emphasis on literary than visual fields. Nonetheless, it is an important compilation for writers who have interests in diverse marketing areas. Available from Writers Market, 9933 Alliance Road, Cincinatti, Ohio 45242.